



Training to become victim's advocate

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6/3/2011 - **RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Tx** -- I didn't know how large of a challenge I was going to face when I walked into victim's advocate training at Lackland Air Force Base, May 16. I knew I wanted to make a difference in the lives of other people, other servicemembers, other survivors.

The 40 hour week-long training was composed of seven sexual assault response coordinators who trained, including myself, 13 Wingmen, civilian and military, from bases all over, on how to be effective victim advocates.

VAs are first responders for military members who have been sexually assaulted. They are dispatched to the victim to complete a slew of roles, including working with authorities and keeping the SARC updated, but the most important role a VA has is supporting the victim.

The VA gives the victim several options about the progression of their reporting if it is applicable. A case can either go restricted or unrestricted.

- A restricted report allows a sexual assault victim, on a confidential basis, to disclose the details of his/her assault to specifically identified individuals so victims may receive medical treatment and counseling, without triggering an official investigation. Servicemembers who wish to file a restricted report can only disclose the fact that an assault occurred to the sexual assault response coordinator, health care provider or chaplain. This is important to keep in mind because if someone within the victim's chain of command is notified first, an official investigation will take place.

- Unrestricted reporting is recommended for victims of sexual assault who desire medical treatment, counseling and an official investigation of the crime. When selecting unrestricted reporting, victims should use current reporting channels-- chain of command, law enforcement-- report the incident to the SARC or request health care providers to notify law enforcement. Details regarding the incident will be limited to only those personnel who have a legitimate need to know. The SARC can answer any questions about the investigative process.

Once a report is unrestricted, there is no way to restrict it or completely control the release of information regarding the incident.

At times the class was emotionally overwhelming, listening to the explicit, varied stories of assault that were a part of rape, realizing that it is a crime of power, not about sexuality or passion.

I learned a larger sense of compassion and obtained more versatile people skills. I realized that sometimes being human comes before being an Airman.

When a survivor came in during class and told us to close our eyes, we didn't know that she'd be sharing her gruesome survivor story with us, we only knew that we were helping with her recovery, although it had been 10 years since she'd been physically assaulted. I couldn't bring myself to close my eyes. I knew the imagery and pain she would share. So I bowed my head politely as she read her gruesome account, stopped to shake the tears off her psyche, drink water and continue.

I watched and listened to my other classmates' murmur of shock and nurturing, happy that my joint service Wingmen, so to speak, were there and empathetic and attentive.

The week sped by quickly, but during those five days we were immersed in role play, as far as how to approach a victim, how to calm a victim down, how to just be there for their personal comfort although they might not be currently aware of how you can help them. We were also taught how to interact with the police.

During graduation, before we were given our certificate, we had to say something we learned in the class.

As I walked up to the front of the class to receive my certificate from all of the JBSA SARC's, and the SARC I'm assigned to, Ms. Jacqueline Shiftlet, 502nd Air Base Wing, Operating Location Bravo SARC, passed it to me, I decided to still tell the class what I'd learned.

"If you're able to, it's okay to tell people about your experiences with being a victim of any kind. People need to know so education can happen. I've been sexually assaulted twice and have decided to take on an educational survivor role, for when people need to see or hear someone of their demographic, rank or experience to help them understand that it's not their fault."

As the class filled with silence and then applause, I realized what our true mission is as advocates: to support and provide assistance for whatever the victim needs at that particular moment.